

**'The Great Middle Continent and a changing early modern geography:
intercultural contact with Europe and India in the shaping of Burmese
cartographies'**

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Introduction

In *Siam Mapped*, Thongchai Winichakul focuses on how "the operations of the technology of territoriality" contributed to the spatial formation of nationhood. Thongchai nowhere promises to get under the skin of modern Thai cartography and to actual show at ground level how cartographic exchange took place. As with much "unravelling the culturally-constructed nation" literature since the publication of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Thongchai's careful study ferrets out cartographic examples that reveal a steady delineation of what he calls the Thai geo-body into the Thai nation-state any of us could easily recognize either on its own or as part of a world map. *Siam Mapped's* emphasis on the transformation of kingdom into nation-state fixates its focus on state-related geographical knowledge and on broad changes in cartography validated by the Thai political centre. Hence, he first portrays a static field of knowledge under the heading "indigenous space and ancient maps" and then turns to the coming of a "new geography [i.e. Western cartography and political concepts]." The crucial moment for change came when King Mongkut accepted the supremacy of Western science over the authority of the Brahmins after the former predicted a solar eclipse that the latter did not. After this acceptance, the path was set in one direction, and the remainder of the discussion focuses on negotiation of the equation between political space and cartographical boundaries.

The negotiation of geographical and cartographical knowledge in early modern Southeast Asia was not quite as progressive, court-centred, or temporally late as this process suggests. If we forget the Andersonian emergence of nation-state narrative and look more broadly and earlier for evidence of intercultural exchange we find a more nuanced and multi-directional flow and formation of a variety of forms of geographical and cartographical knowledge. My paper looks at intercultural exchange between people, ideas, and spatial representations connected with Burma and India mainly in the 1790s during the reign of King Bodawhpaya, but I do this with the understanding that there was no "before" and "after," no point when everyone in a given culture or polity exchanged one body of knowledge for another. Certainly, this period was one of serious change in both India and Burma. In India by this time, the British had exerted control over Bengal and Calcutta had become a centre for Western learning about Asia. At the same time, the Burmese court was only beginning to realize that regime change had taken place and this at a time when it was undergoing a social, religious, and intellectual reformation that sought to bring Burmese knowledge more in line with the old India, while coming into friction with its new political realities. The tensions that resulted impacted the exchange of geographical knowledge in complex ways.

In this paper, I examine a late eighteenth century phase of cartographic encounter. My main focus is on intercultural exchanges between Europeans and Indians and Burmese in the exploration of new notions of geography, cartographical technologies, and the influence of both in shaping Burmese worldviews in the early modern period. The paper locates the origin of some of the most dramatic changes in indigenous cartographical approaches and understandings of the outside world on the political periphery and not at the centre, thus contributing to a growing body of literature that shifts attention to the margins of society in seeking to understand early modern intercultural exchange.

The mapping of locality

Michael Adas explains that most people in the early modern period, including Europeans outside of the small circles of the educated elites, as well as Asians and Africans measured "distance[s] on the basis of human dimensions (hand, foot, and the like) or activities" and were not subject to any standard beyond those of their locality.¹ Despite the similarities in approaches to space measurement, there were substantial differences between the structure of political, economic, geographic and other relationships that shaped the local world of early modern people.

As Christine Carpenter explains of fifteenth century Warwickshire,

"[t]he county was in fact a wholly artificial creation, consisting of a number of areas, each of them facing outwards to the neighbouring county...Although one would not expect a county to constitute a geographical and economic unit, Warwickshire is more fragmented than most. In some sense this applies to all midland counties and is due to the artificiality of their original shiring. In the case of Warwickshire, regionalism was particularly acute. The formation of the county had not only cut across geographical boundaries, but across the territories of existing peoples and kingdoms and had also left a number of anomalies in the detached parts of counties lying outside the boundaries... [additionally] geographical disunity was matched by an ecclesiastical one."²

As a result, there was no sense of any kind of community connected on the basis of county belongingness, anything beyond administrative functionality, bounded by lines of the map, was dependent on the personality and abilities of the earl.³

The county map, at the level of the *myo*, also represented the basic administrative map of early modern Burma and I am not convinced that the *myo* was very much more cohesive than the fifteenth century West Midlands county that Carpenter describes. Recent literature on borderlands has drawn attention to the mobility of cultural interaction, knowledge formation, and the circulation of ideas alongside trade, migration, and war in early modern Southeast Asia. This has been obscured largely because of political formulations that stressed social stasis, political unity, universal regularity and harmony, and texts that were

¹ Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, 63.

² Carpenter, *Locality and polity: a study of Warwickshire landed society, 1401-1499*, pp. 26-27.

³ Carpenter, *Locality and polity: a study of Warwickshire landed society, 1401-1499*, p. 351.

written to reflect these themes. Nevertheless, county maps in early modern Britain and Burma cut across different networks and stalled mobility. I find particularly useful here James Scott's idea of legibility. As Scott explains, state's need to be able to "see" the land in order to administer it. This involves transforming geographic space into something measureable, allottable, and taxable.

County maps were one of two kinds of local maps that found their way back to the royal palace. These were the big glorious affairs painted in bright colours on huge canvases rolled up in velvet and then sent to the court. Although the purposes of these maps were to aid administration, the degree of their utility to the royal court is doubtful. Most of these maps were "our county" type maps that were intended to embellish the grandeur of the local myothugyi, indicate the range of good works, through the focus on temples, as well as elaborate the wonders of the area and the magnificence of its rivers, mountains, and other attractions. Perhaps also, these maps made other data unreadable. Lacking perhaps space or scope for details on land acreage or population centres, there would be little to question or contradict the official reports of local resources submitted in the form of sittans.

Indispensible to court administration was another kind of map, the simpler and ubiquitous black bark parabaik, on which maps would be drawn with white steatite, soap-stone, or charcoal.⁴ These thick, blackened, pressed board writing materials were the yellow legal pads of today. They were intended for temporary note-taking and writing in chalk allowed the scribblings to be rubbed out and revised. When the 1795 embassy arrived, they found the Burmese officials and indeed most other Burmese using them for all kinds of note taking. As Buchanan describes:

"almost every man carries with him a parawaik [sic], in which he keeps his accounts, copies songs..., and takes memorandums of any thing curious. It is on these parawaiks that the zares or writers in all courts, and public offices, take down the proceedings and orders: from thence copying such parts as are necessary, into books of a more durable and elegant nature."⁵

Royal edicts from Burma, intended for everyday administrative judgments among other things, included frequent referencing of their use in all kinds of disputes over boundaries between different local political jurisdictions, temple and private lands, and the like.⁶ Later, after Buchanan's time, and new generations of British traders, officials, and scholars began collecting things Burmese for libraries and museums back at home, they focused their attention mainly on the other, larger, more elaborate, and impressive painted canvas versions of Burmese map where the emphasis was on the maps decorative aspects as much as it was on the maps utility. These became to Western scholars "the" Burmese maps. Indeed, even Buchanan sought to make the maps look like proper maps by having them painted on proper paper for presentation to Company officials in Calcutta. After examining Buchanan's *parabaik* copies, a

⁴ Hamilton, "Account of a Map drawn by a native of Dawe or Tavay," 228; Trant, Two years in Ava: From May 1824, to May 1826, p. 266; Symes, Embassy to Ava, vol. 2, p. 135..

⁵ Buchanan, "On the Medicine, Literature, & etc. of the Burmese," 298.

⁶ Cite royal orders

Muslim painter copied the outlines of the geographical features onto Western paper, the names being filled in after.⁷ As for the smudged scribbles on black *parabaik*, in their own way illegible to these new Western visitors, they were largely ignored and left undisturbed in the recesses of collections until relatively recent decades. As far as we are aware, however, the *parabaik* maps were made for administrative purposes only.

It is more difficult to determine how everyday people not involved in administrative record-taking and keeping would have put spatial representations of their world on the map. Given their origins and purposes, the maps we get rarely indicate how people outside the court and county officials viewed geography per se. Nonetheless, there are glimpses and they come from Buchanan's interviews with Burmese in 1795. One of the main figures in the early exchange of geographic and cartographic information between Burma and the British was Francis Buchanan.⁸ A medical doctor by training, in 1795, Buchanan joined Captain Michael Symes aboard the East India company cruiser *Seahorse* as ship's surgeon as part of the Company's Embassy to the Court of Ava, remaining in Burma from 19 March 1795 to 27 November 1795.⁹ While Symes' general notes on the country and Buchanan's botanical collections are the best remembered results of this journey, Buchanan also "procured" a number of maps of Burma from the Burmese.¹⁰ Buchanan found them to be "very deficient in accuracy."¹¹ Although geographical information from them was passed on to Company officials in Calcutta,¹² the maps themselves remained in Buchanan's hands until he wrote and published about them in a series of articles, published in the *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal*, in the early 1820s, as the Anglo-Burmese Crisis headed steadily toward the outbreak of the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824.

The Burmese Buchanan encountered mainly understood the world geographically in reference to their *lebenswelt* [their living world]. Unlike the present, where geographical information can be widely accessed freely on maps and the internet, geographical information, such as the location of lucrative markets, production centres, raw materials, and so on were privileged information. In some places, such as early modern Amsterdam, where there was a public market for nautical and overseas maps, maps were not made of most things. The *lebenswelt* is also a highly peculiar realm unique to each person and their daily interactions and life experiences. The most striking example of this is the warning in precolonial Burmese sources that one had to know three places, including where their umbilical cord was hidden, to prevent that from falling into the hands of wizards. A map of one man's *lebenswelt* was thus either too valuable or too irrelevant to another to warrant to production of a map. With the

⁷ Hamilton, "Account of a Map drawn by a native of Dawe or Tavay," 229.

⁸ Francis Buchanan (1762-) had been trained in medicine at Edinburgh, where he received his degree in 1783. During this time, he devoted considerable energy to the study of Botany in particular. Upon graduation in 1783, he became an assistant-surgeon in the British navy, but poor health that kept him inactive until 1794, when he became a surgeon in the East India Company.

⁹ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 89-90; Symes, An account of an embassy to the kingdom of Ava, Volume 1, p. 151.

¹⁰ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 89-90.

¹¹ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 90.

¹² Symes said that despite the maps being entirely local and not drawn to scale, "They are nevertheless documents of much intrinsic value and importance. Symes, Embassy to Ava, vol. 2, p. 80-81.

colonial period, maps became commonplace, but not so before the colonial period. As a result, knowledge geography outside of one's own lebenswelt was very limited. Buchanan found this out for himself in dealing with the "Man from Tavoy." Buchanan says that the map was that of the sitkei of Tavoy, that a native of Tavoy drew the map, and that "being a native" he was most knowledgeable about Tavoy itself and less so territory around it.¹³ The connection between the lebenswelt and geographic information also conditioned the influence from outside models of geography. As Buchanan explains of the maps drawn by those close to the border with China, the use of double lines for rivers like those used in Western maps, the use of wavy single lines for mountains and with rough representations of trees as used in Chinese porcelain, the resemblance so close in fact that Buchanan suspected that Chinese artists had had an influence upon Burmese maps.¹⁴

Geographical memories of routes travelled, for example, would be shaped by how a Burmese traveller experienced the road, without necessary reference to actual coordinates, but not without reference to distances. Buchanan writing on his 1795 experiences, for example, relates that "[Burmese] Merchants and travellers put down in their books the names of all the places on such routes as they frequent, with their estimated distances."¹⁵ Buchanan was even able to acquire some of these and sent them on the East India Company.¹⁶

The highly personal nature of geographic information should have been clear to Buchanan when the sayeidawgyi failed in his own personal attempt to draw a map from his memory of the landscape. As Buchanan explains,¹⁷ "This person's first attempts, as might be expected, were very rude. He began at a given place, say his native city, and, going on in a certain direction, he laid down the places occurring until his paper afforded no more room. He then twisted round his line, until he completed the route with which he had commenced. Then he returned so the first point, and commencing with a second route, proceeded in the same manner, and continued so on until he traced the whole of what he intended. The remote parts were thus distorted in a most extraordinary degree."¹⁸ Buchanan also encountered this with an existing map brought by the Governor of Bhamo in early September 1795, relating his journey from Amarapura to Peking.¹⁹ Buchanan found this to be one of the most difficult maps with which he had to work, being "one of the rudest, which I procured."²⁰ The map was drawn by one of the Sawbwa's officers. This man had grown up on the frontiers with China and was educated in areas of Chinese settlement. Hence, he had some knowledge of the Chinese language and had accompanied the Sawbwa's embassy to Peking. Buchanan took him, like his sawbwa, to have

¹³ Hamilton, "Account of a Map drawn by a native of Dawe or Tavay," 229.

¹⁴ Hamilton, "Account of a Map of the Country North from Ava," 76.

¹⁵ Buchanan, "On the Religion and Literature of the Burmas," pp. 225-226.

¹⁶ Buchanan, "On the Religion and Literature of the Burmas," pp. 225-226.

¹⁷ The sa-ye-daw-gyi (a secretary of state) was a native of Toungoo. During Buchanan's stay at Amarapura in 1795, they became acquaintances. Buchanan describes him as a "mild and well behaved man...not so intelligent and quick as the slave who gave me the general map already published ... but he was not so timid, having powerful connections." He provided Buchanan with several maps. Hamilton, "Account of a Map of the Country North from Ava," 76.

¹⁸ Hamilton, "Account of a Map of the Country North from Ava," 76.

¹⁹ Symes, *Embassy to Ava*, vol. 2, p. 134.

²⁰ Hamilton, "Account of a Map of a Route Between Tartary and Amarapura," 32.

broadened his horizons by the journey to China and "both had acquired a knowledge of the world, and a politeness, that distinguished them from other Mranma chiefs."²¹ It was this man who the sawbwa sent repeatedly to see Buchanan at Amarapura to "explain such matters in the map as occasioned difficulty."²² As Michael Symes describes it, "The places are distinctly marked; but not having any scale, the measurement was extremely confused, and so disproportionate that it was impossible to judge of distances with any degree of precision. We could, however, trace his progress through the Chinese dominions in the Jesuits map that is prefixed to Du Halde's account of China."²³

Buchanan seems to have misunderstood the disjuncture between lebenswelt geographical memory and royal political geography in his comparisons between a local map of the Tarout country he had received and a map of the kingdom of Burma. Buchanan observes that these maps had an "essential difference." There was a particular area covered by both maps, that the Tarout map filled in and the Burma empire map had blank. Buchanan conjectured that this was a difference of necessity at variations of scale. A local map needed more accuracy, so local data was filled in. In a larger map, of the entire kingdom, however, less accuracy was needed and so local data was left out.²⁴ Although plausible in Western mapping traditions, another reading is that the map produced of the locality, the lebenswelt geography, was more detailed for reasons discussed above and that when a map of the realm was produced, this represented a different mental category. One was not a more focused part of the larger, but a representation of a different field of knowledge and experience. I will return to the production of "national" maps later.

It was a far easier task, Buchanan found, to have to have the Burmese translate their knowledge of lebenswelt geography into Western style maps than for him to decode, even with Burmese help, his growing collection of lebenswelt maps. The sayeidawgyi's failure in his initial to produce a map Buchanan was satisfied with that seems to have led him to this conclusion.²⁵ Buchanan had the sa-ye-daw-gyi keep producing new maps until "after some pains ... he improved much" and produced the map which Buchanan would eventually publish in the 1820s.²⁶ Buchanan underwent a similar experience with the slave of the einsheimin. As Buchanan recorded, "Before he succeeded so far as he has done, he made several attempts, with less success; and the nature of our maps, together with the manner of laying down places by bearing and distance, had been repeatedly explained to him."²⁷ One even gains the impression from reading Buchanan's various articles, situating the events contained in their original chronology, that Buchanan became better at explaining European maps to the Burmese as himself began to understand Burmese maps better. His encounter with the myo-sa-yei (town-

²¹ Hamilton, "Account of a Map of a Route Between Tartary and Amarapura," 32.

²² Hamilton, "Account of a Map of a Route Between Tartary and Amarapura," 32.

²³ Symes, *Embassy to Ava*, vol. 2, p. 135.

²⁴ Hamilton, "On a Map of the Tarout Shan Territory," 73.

²⁵ The sa-ye-daw-gyi (a secretary of state) was a native of Toungoo. During Buchanan's stay at Amarapura in 1795, they became acquaintances. Buchanan describes him as a "mild and well behaved man...not so intelligent and quick as the slave who gave me the general map already published ... but he was not so timid, having powerful connections." He provided Buchanan with several maps. Hamilton, "Account of a Map of the Country North from Ava," 76.

²⁶ Hamilton, "Account of a Map of the Country North from Ava," 76.

²⁷ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 94.

clerk) of Pagan on the embassy's way back out of Burma in November 1795.²⁸ Buchanan took the myo-sa-yei out to his boat on the Irrawaddy, showed him his European maps, and explained "their nature to him."²⁹ There was almost a sense of eagerness to the exchanges now, Buchanan observing that this man

"was improving fast in understanding the nature of our maps, and was engaged in drawing the one here given, when our sudden departure put a stop to his work in a very imperfect state."³⁰

The political importance of geographic knowledge had ensured that the exchanges of maps did not take place between official representatives. Buchanan accompanied an official embassy and invariably, the people that he encountered and the kinds of maps he was exposed to were connected in one way or another with the state. Moreover, again because of the political stakes involved, it could only have been Buchanan and not Symes who encountered the maps first-hand and it was servants of those in the court or outlying officials who became the interlocutors. These conditions shaped the exchange in interesting ways. For one thing, as with most state administrations, one of Buchanan's main contacts, the sayei-daw-gyi, was used to taking down enormous amount of information on *parabaik* at any given time. Thus, he, like many Burmese state clerks, was accustomed to writing down everything in short-hand. His provision of names the map he made for Buchanan made heavy use of contractions that added a new kind of illegibility to the maps. It was not until later, on his return to Calcutta, that Buchanan would be able to turn to another interlocutor, the native of Tavoy, to figure these contractions out.³¹

The political consequences also gave the exchanges and element of danger, for while many, even some quite distant from the royal capital, were willing to share Burmese maps and redraw them as it suited Buchanan, they were in great fear of being identified should the maps somehow fall back into the hands of other Burmese authorities. In these cases, to prevent identification, "they rubbed out most of the names, as written in the proper character."³² Certainly, Buchanan did not lose all of the original names that had been written "in the Mranma character,"³³ but he lost enough to have to resort to desperate measures to save the identifying information. In these cases, Buchanan, who had taken instruction in the Burmese language during the course of his time in Burma,³⁴ attempted to

²⁸ Buchanan joined Symes on a return visit to the home of the hereditary chief of Pagan in November 1795, during a brief stop on the embassy's return to Calcutta from Amarapura. It was here that Buchanan met the myo-sa-ye (town-clerk) of Pagan. Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the vicinity of Paukgan or Pagan," 234. As Buchanan described this man, "This person seemed to be under no apprehension of giving information, and was an intelligent obliging man, like his master, the chief officer of the city (Mro-Za-re), who was said to hold his office by hereditary right, and to be by birth a Talain or Peguer, descended of the ancient princes of that nation, who at one time governed the empire as sovereigns." Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the vicinity of Paukgan or Pagan," 231.

²⁹ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the vicinity of Paukgan or Pagan," 234.

³⁰ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the vicinity of Paukgan or Pagan," 231.

³¹ Hamilton, "Account of a Map of the Country North from Ava," 76.

³² Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 91; see also p. 94.

³³ Hamilton, "Account of a Map drawn by a native of Dawe or Tavay," 228.

³⁴ Buchanan attempted to do this on the basis of instruction in Burmese he had received while on Symes' embassy. During his stay at Amarapura, the Burmese court had assigned an officer to take care

fill in the missing names in Burmese quickly himself at first, going by what he heard.³⁵ When Buchanan returned to Calcutta and had new, paper versions of the maps made, he had the Burmese names on these maps, both those he had taken down and those of the original markings that had not been erased, read out by a Burmese, the oft-cited "Native of Tavoy,"³⁶ while Buchanan wrote out what he had heard in Roman characters on the new paper map.³⁷ The native of Tavoy then wrote in the names of important places in Burmese character as much as he could, but left much out, because he found it awkward to use "our paper and pens."³⁸

We return here to another perspective on legibility. Just as the royal court and local mapmakers had their own takes on how to make the landscape legible, so too did Buchanan. British authorities in Burma would come to accept, after a time and with much scrutiny, that actually Burmese maps were "proved very accurate."³⁹ But there were presentational incongruities. At first glance, they seemed as far from useful as a "map" could get. British officers, for example, from Symes in 1795,⁴⁰ to those occupying Burma during the First Anglo-Burmese War complained that indigenous maps were not drawn in reference to the four cardinal points, which really had more to do with the applicability of the European compass than to the utility of the map to a Burmese traveller or administrator.⁴¹ Nor were they "drawn ... on any fixed scale."⁴² As one officer at Prome explained, "at first sight difficult to comprehend; the trees, pagodas, mountains, and ships, being designated without any reference to the proper proportion of the objects."⁴³ But the differences involved more than scale, for Burmese maps represented a number of concepts whose replication on the map was just as important as more mundane features as the acreage of a rice-field plot. Buchanan's complaints about one map in particular, the map of the Tarout Shan, provided nothing in the way of correct distances between towns and a

of the needs of the embassy. This man's son then helped Buchanan "to read and write" in Burmese. Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 91.

³⁵ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 91.

³⁶ Buchanan met the native of Tavoy at Calcutta when he returned from the embassy to Burma. This man provided his assistance in Calcutta in "arranging the geographical materials procured in Ava." Hamilton, "Account of a Map drawn by a native of Dawe or Tavay," 228.

³⁷ Hamilton, "Account of a Map drawn by a native of Dawe or Tavay," 228.

³⁸ Hamilton, "Account of a Map drawn by a native of Dawe or Tavay," 229; Nevertheless, Buchanan appears to have rendered names in the Burmese script mainly a means of both maintaining accuracy of information until he could decipher it and as a possible subject for his own personal future intellectual investigations, as indeed they were used by him decades later. Secondarily, however, some names, again those of major importance, were penned in after, indicating perhaps an expectation that they might be helpful in understanding future collections of Burmese geographical information. Ultimately, the Romanized names would have the most important impact. To make the geographic information in the maps Buchanan devised a new system of Romanizing Burmese words to render names on the map accurately in English. In later years, Buchanan abandoned this system when he discovered that another system was already in published form in two editions, entitled *Amadutii Alphabetum Barmanorum*. Although this system "is more suited to the Italian than to the English pronunciation" Buchanan would adopt the Italian system when he republished his Burmese maps years later. Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 91.

³⁹ Trant, *Two years in Ava: From May 1824, to May 1826*, p. 266.

⁴⁰ Symes, *Embassy to Ava*, vol. 2, p. 135.

⁴¹ Trant, *Two years in Ava: From May 1824, to May 1826*, p. 266.

⁴² Trant, *Two years in Ava: From May 1824, to May 1826*, p. 266.

⁴³ Trant, *Two years in Ava: From May 1824, to May 1826*, p. 266.

governorship. As Buchanan complained, on the map, "Banmue, level days' journey from the capital, stands no farther from thence than Main Zin, a town distance only five day's journey."⁴⁴ As Buchanan notes, the map showed the ruler of the territory [Laktho] "including the capital, his dominions contained twelve cities (Main), each the seat of a governor, and its territory is stated to extend from three to twelve days' journey in different directions from the capital."⁴⁵ The map, appears to have mainly intended to position local governorships in a ring of power buttressing the main ruler that reflected geographic direction and demonstrated the relative imbalance of power between the centre and the outlying cities, as well as the balance in power among all of these relative to the centre. Nevertheless, information regarding distances was contained in this and other maps, for in a similar map, "the distances [were] written between each town or village."⁴⁶

To make the Burmese maps legible to European users, either Company officials or mapmakers. Buchanan encouraged Burmese to Westernize their maps and their ways of representing places and spaces. As he explains, "I found the people wonderfully quick in comprehending the nature of our maps; and some of them, to whom I could render the occupation advantageous, very soon improved their plans" or "drawings."⁴⁷ But, in actuality, the process was much more difficult than this, at least for the Burmese. They lacked a prior text when it came to Western cartographic representation and he expected the Burmese to undertake a huge intellectual leap into the role of interlocutor doing, as it were, much of Buchanan's work for him. These revised maps were then sent to the Governor-General of India, written in Buchanan's new system of Romanization.⁴⁸ As for Buchanan's copies, their story was not yet finished. In the early 1820s, Buchanan thinking it would be "interesting to publish some of the original maps, exactly as drawn by the natives,"⁴⁹ published his hybrid maps as examples of Burmese "native" maps in several academic journals of the time.

There was a huge imbalance in knowledge about each other between the centre and periphery and this was played out through maps. Before the emergence of the idea of the nation-state, localities were tied to the centre and not to each other. If all roads led to Rome, so too did all maps. Rarely were there maps of the whole country, even in Europe, and what few there were, were

⁴⁴ Hamilton, "On a Map of the Tarout Shan Territory," 72.

⁴⁵ Hamilton, "On a Map of the Tarout Shan Territory," 72.

⁴⁶ Trant, *Two years in Ava: From May 1824, to May 1826*, p. 266.

⁴⁷ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 90.

⁴⁸ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 90.

⁴⁹ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 90. Buchanan is not explicit, however, if these original maps by the natives are the first or second generation maps. Further, he states that he will add short explanations in order to make them "intelligible to European men of sciences," which could suggest that the maps themselves had not gone through a process of Westernization. Nevertheless, my reading of the resulting descriptions indicates a focus on explaining unreliable measurement and the locations of different "races" in the country rather than making alien map-craft intelligible to a Western audience and this suggests that these maps had already undergone some changes as to make them look more, to Western eyes, like maps. Moreover, a number of details together suggest that these are indeed second-generation. For one thing, Buchanan admits that the indigenous maps he was republishing had been drawn by their provider, as mentioned above, they were afraid that their handwriting might be recognized by Burmese authorities. For another, Buchanan on occasion explicitly says that this is the case, as with the map of Ava provided by a slave. Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 90, 93

king and not a representation intended for popular dissemination. Prior to the 1790s, I cannot find any reference to a single map of the entire realm in the hands of either the Burmese or anyone else. The first reference to a Burmese map of the realm comes from Francis Buchanan. Buchanan's informants revealed that kingdom had a dynamic rather than static map kept inside the Hluttaw in the royal palace.⁵⁰ This appears to be the map upon which the "slave of the einsheimin" who drew the map and who would have had access to the Hluttaw used the basis for his geographic knowledge of the kingdom as a whole.⁵¹ It was regularly corrected, by comparing it with new information that reached the court from various sources.⁵² One such source was information gathered from "the various expeditions which the present royal family have undertaken."⁵³ Another source were sittans, "the lists of cities and villages, which the governors of provinces are annually obliged to transmit to court."⁵⁴

Without a map of the realm supplied by the Burmese court, the Company had to produce its own map, using the geographic data Buchanan had collected to help supplement the many Burmese maps he had had produced, including the map of the realm drawn by memory by the slave of the einsheimin. By all accounts, they may have been valuable for some data, but their lack of uniform standard meant that they could not be formed into a general map on their own. As Symes commented,

"Those sketches [Buchanan collected] ... being contained in various and detached pieces, not forming any connected body, nor yet reduced to a graduated scale, can hardly be brought into the shape of a regular map, without the aid of some further communications."⁵⁵

In Calcutta, the Company's historian, Alexander Dalrymple was even less optimistic,

These maps obtained by Dr. Buchanan from the natives, although they elucidate the geography, cannot be considered as positive documents for the construction of an accurate map of these countries, not being laid down geometrically, nor having even scales affixed; indeed, it is not certain that any of them were meant to be laid down by an uniform scale; the wonder is, that there should be any thing like uniformity.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, ultimately, Dalrymple did construct a map of Burma on Western lines out of Buchanan's maps and information. This map was then published by Michael Symes in Symes' Account of the Journey to Ava, becoming known as the first good map of the entirety of the Burmese kingdom.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Buchanan, "On the Religion and Literature of the Burmas," pp. 225-226.

⁵¹ Hamilton, "On a Map of the Tarout Shan Territory," 71. As Buchanan observes, "his intelligence and manners denoted a person who had held considerable rank, and received a good education." Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 94.

⁵² Buchanan, "On the Religion and Literature of the Burmas," pp. 225-226.

⁵³ Buchanan, "On the Religion and Literature of the Burmas," pp. 225-226.

⁵⁴ Buchanan goes on to say that these lists provided "an accurate account, or one pretended to be so, of all the houses and male inhabitants in each district." Buchanan, "On the Religion and Literature of the Burmas," pp. 225-226.

⁵⁵ Symes, Embassy to Ava, vol. 2, p. 81.

⁵⁶ Alexander Dalrymple, quoted in Michael Symes, SBBR version, 59-60.

⁵⁷ Hamilton, "An Account of a Map of the Countries Subject to the King of Ava," 90.

The [Un]structure of Knowledge: Beyond the Lebenswelt

If the royal centre through its collections of local sittings, maps, and other geographic data gathering devices, what did localities know about external geographies. One might reasonably ask about the mechanics of the Burmese system of geographic knowledge. Unlike the colonial Burma, early modern Burmese knowledge formation was not subject to the same systemization of geographic knowledge formation. Different knowledge communities or centres controlled geographic knowledge niches, but there was no centralized system of knowledge redistribution. Certainly state officials who were required to draw administrative maps learned how to do this from their peers and certainly these officials were drawn from and returned to general society. Certainly, servants of ministers and kings were exposed to the great map of the kingdom in the palace and carried this memory around with them. But there was no uniformity and no incentive to retain, recirculate, or build upon this information. Everyone knew geography differently. For this reason, the British who visited Burma in 1795 were unable to ferret out from Burmese maps that in any way agreed with each other. No one saw the land through either the centre or through the same eyes.

But the general population also drew ideas from the circulation of novices and often older relatives to the monastery where they were exposed to Buddhist cosmographies. For most people, the world beyond their own lebenswelt, the difference between cosmography and geography was difficult for people to discern. They usually overlapped and this is where mythology came in. Some of the only representations of overseas travel in pre nineteenth century Burmese sources are tales of mythological proportions.

The court's spatial representations for general consumption were laid out not on charts, but through the layout of the court, its people and palaces, its appointments, and its symbolism, through reference to the cardinal points portraying the king as the centre of the universe, with queens north east, south, and west. The king participated in rituals, such as digging soil personally, ensuring its fecundity, parading around cities to capture their sovereignty and so on. Nevertheless, the royal center knew the kingdom through agents and the collection of the various myo maps it collected from the kingdom's counties, giving a kind of lebenswelt of its own.

What the royal court did not get were details about the royal domains outside of its own. The main exception was to the east. The Burmese court had route maps to Peking and centuries of periodic suzerainty over political centres in the Tai world to the East meant that the quality of the map of the royal domain was possessed here as well, these places having gone through the same processes of cartographic scrutiny at one time or another and the artefacts of this scrutiny embedded on the royal map or stored in the royal archives. Nevertheless, large swathes of the mundane world, particularly to the West and anything beyond the Tai world to the east, was poorly defined. Again, in such places, it was difficult to discern the mundane from the various imaginings of the fantastic. Burmese interaction with the outside world was limited mainly to the countries in its immediate vicinity, compressed into the outer limits.

The Burmese relationship with India, as with the rest of the world, had not before really been worked out on maps or globes. We do not have the

representations in paintings of rulers on globes or holding globes as Ramaswamy has found for Mughal India as early as the sixteenth century. The first known globes in Burma do not date before the 1790s and even then it is not clear that it was understood to represent anything. In fact, all indications are that they did not. During the mission under Hiram Cox, for example, a number of globes and maps were brought. One on occasion, Cox greeted the wungyi in his chamber having laid out globes and maps as well as mathematical instruments for the wungyi's inspection. When the wungyi arrived, Cox discussed the globes, and described their use, although the wungyi was mainly interested in the camera obscura Cox had also brought, suggesting that he did not fathom the significance of the globes.⁵⁸ As with maps of the realm, before the 1790s, we do not have maps depicting the political or even geographic relationship of the kingdom to foreign lands. Military expansion westwards led to a number of failed inroads into the kingdom of Arakan, which finally fell in 1785, and then problems on the border with Bengal, which, by that late date, was firmly in British hands.⁵⁹

Bodawhpaya's pursuit of a more detailed geographic perspective on India was for mundane purposes. There are strong indications that the Burmese needed Western cartographical help in dealing with politics and military preparations regarding Indian geographic space over the entirety of Bodawhpaya's reign and after. On 5 February 1797, Bodawhpaya sent his Raywhoon with coins and a map painted on cloth of a country called Vizaddee, which Cox took to be Assam, having been given to Bodawhpaya by supposed ambassadors from that place, and asked of Cox if he "had any knowledge" about that place.⁶⁰ On 8 February 1797, Bodawhpaya summoned Mr. Mountcourse. Bodawhpaya asked Mountcourse whether he knew anything about a country called Vizaddee/Vizalley and whether the English ruled it. Bodawhpaya said he had earlier sent Cox coins from a country called Vizaddee/Vizalley and that Cox had shown his Raywhoon a map of that country. Bodawhpaya now requested that Cox send that particular map to him.⁶¹ The following day, 9 February 1797, Bodawhpaya summoned Mountcourse again and this time Mountcourse brought Cox's map of Hindustan with him. As Bodawhpaya was busy with the monks at the time, Mountcourse left the map behind. The wungyi then returned the map back to Cox later in the evening.⁶² Cox told the wungyi to let Bodawhpaya know that he was happy to come to the court and explain the map to the king and the Wungyi replied that Bodawhpaya had actually meant to send a big book so that information on it could be taken down.⁶³ Certainly, Bayly has commented on the period of Bodawhpaya's grandson and successor that there is an "impression that the Ava monarchy had been attempting in recent years to build up a fuller basis of geographical and demographic knowledge" in the run-up to the kingdom's first conflict with the British.⁶⁴ According to those who visited the

⁵⁸ Cox, *Journal of a Residence*, 157-158.

⁵⁹ A truism of Southeast Asian historiography is that the problems on the frontiers with Bengal and Assam that led to the First Anglo-Burmese War were fundamentally rooted in different conceptions of political frontiers is outdated.

⁶⁰ Cox, *Journal of a Residence*, 70.

⁶¹ Cox, *Journal of a Residence*, 96.

⁶² Cox, *Journal of a Residence*, 97.

⁶³ Cox, *Journal of a Residence*, 97.

⁶⁴ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 120.

court in the years between the production of the 1819 map and the outbreak of the war, Burmese officials were interested in "the practicability of conquering Bengal."⁶⁵ In one instance in 1822, one visitor to the court, the American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson, was introduced to Bagyidaw's young son, about whom his retainers said: "this is the Prince who, when he arrives at manhood, is to rule over all your Kula countries," which would have included British lands in India.⁶⁶

Political expediency thus contributed to the exchange of geographic information. The Burmese drive to understand India better geographically also contributed to Buchanan's acquisition and rendering of Burmese maps mentioned earlier. The "native of Tavoy" was in Calcutta where he encountered Buchanan because he was on a data gathering mission that included, aside from more information on India, information on the construction of temples in the current royal capital of Candy and the formal royal capital at Anuradapura in Sri Lanka, from whence he had just returned.⁶⁷ Another of Buchanan's local informants, the sa-ye-daw-gyi of the Burmese court at Amarapura, visited Buchanan personally during the former's visit because the latter wanted information on Bengal.⁶⁸ Throughout his relations, Buchanan gives the impression that his dealings with Burmese closer to the royal centre regarding any area of geographic knowledge was more on the order of an exchange than extraction, as if this information was valuable and hence useful for promotion or reward by interests in the court.

A quarter of a century later, the Burmese and the British were again sharing the same cartographical interlocutors. The court turned to a Madras-born Anglo-Indian interlocutor named William Gibson, who had lived almost his entire life in Burma. As Burney had been informed, Gibson "had frequently been employed by the King of Ava in compiling maps of different portions of his empire, and of charts and descriptive accounts."⁶⁹ Gibson now became useful for a larger project-- making a larger map that incorporated the Indian and Burmese frontiers, which he completed for Bodawhpaya's successor Bagyidaw in 1819.⁷⁰ Gibson also drew up a map of Burma for the British as well. When the British invaded Lower Burma in 1824, they had to rely upon Gibson. He provided a general map of the country, which had much useful information despite being, generally, "extremely incorrect."⁷¹ According to Trant, the only other document they had was Wood's survey of the Irrawaddy River, which was just about "the only guide for our military operations."⁷²

Burma never got very far with its attacks on Bengal and its lebenswelt never really moved much further beyond the Western frontier than Assam and Manipur in the 1820s or Southern Vietnam in the East. Hence the world from India on West was not sketched out nor its representations on the globe really understood by the court. In the early years of Bagyidaw's reign, for example,

⁶⁵ Wilson, *Documents*, p. 231.

⁶⁶ Wilson, *Documents*, p. 231.

⁶⁷ Buchanan, "On the Medicine, Literature, & etc. of the Burmese," 297.

⁶⁸ Hamilton, "Account of a Map of the Country North from Ava," 76.

⁶⁹ Minute by Burney in GG to Dirs, 12 Nov. 1824, HM 660., quoted in Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 120, ft. 102.

⁷⁰ Wilson, *Documents*, p. 232.

⁷¹ Trant, *Two years in Ava: From May 1824, to May 1826*, p. 70.

⁷² Trant, *Two years in Ava: From May 1824, to May 1826*, p. 8, 70.

Gibson had drawn for the court a map covering India, Burma, Siam, and Cochinchina (southern Vietnam). In response to this, the king revealed his disquiet:

Bagyidaw: "You have assigned to the English too much territory."

Gibson, paraphrased by Adoniram Judson: "the map g[ives] a correct representation of the extent of the British dominions."

Bagyidaw: "The territory of the strangers is unreasonably large."⁷³

This relationship of the court to world geography had not changed very much four decades later. As Dodwell relates,

King Mindon (1853-78) was a complete contrast to his four murderous and insane predecessors. Although so shocked at a map of the world, which showed the size of Burma, that the bystanders had to vow the map was wrong, he was erudite by native standards.⁷⁴

The continuity of haziness of beyond my-world geographies was taken as a potential opportunity by a new group of interlocutors. The American Baptist missionaries who became the chief conduit of Western cartographical knowledge to the Burmese. For these missionaries, Western cartography and the globe became a means of the disseminating Christianity. Their belief was that the acceptance Western geography would cast self-doubt among Burmese as to the truth of Buddhism, thus making them more liable to convert. In the process they also became incidentally a major source for geographical and cartographical knowledge to the court.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The nature of the organization of the kingdom and the control over cartographic knowledge had important consequences for the exchange of geographic information. First, because of the consequences for sharing centrally controlled geographic information about the localities and the royal domain, it meant that exchanges would not occur between high officials of the East India Company and the Burmese Court. It was only possible for secondary agents, such as Buchanan and lower ranking officials or servants or, better, those far distant from the royal center.

Second, it meant that when information was shared, it mainly reflected knowledge of individual *lebenswelts*. Most could only relate geographical information about their particular locality. The most unusual position was held by the servant of the heir-apparent, whose place in the royal court and origins in elsewhere, meant his my-worlds included both a locality and the royal domain, producing maps of each, whose information did not seem to coincide completely.

⁷³ Wilson, *Documents*, p. 232.

⁷⁴ Henry Dodwell, *Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958): vol. 6, p. 432.

⁷⁵ Wilson, *Documents*, p. 235.

Third, it meant that when Buchanan had these Burmese re-do their maps, there was no room for them to replicate their skills and disseminate the new knowledge, because they were not in positions of authority to direct others to do so and their production of maps reflected the demands of the authority of those who were not challenged by the new geography.

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